Συμεών Λογοθέτου του Μεταφραστού

Symeon Logotheta Metaphrastes,

Επιλογές από τον Βίο του Αγίιου Νικολάου
(αγγλική μετάφραση)

THE REAL ST. NICHOLAS
Symeon the Metaphrast

Selections from *The Life of Nicholas*

Provided Courtesy of:
Eternal Word Television Network
5817 Old Leeds Road
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The home of his admirable father was Patara, the foremost famous city of Lycia. His parents were of substantial lineage, holding property enough without superfluity. To be sure they had had more than a taste of worldly pomp and circumstance. But they nobly exemplified for their son how he should want nothing for his own selfish purposes by devoting themselves wholly to that which is good and following it in all ways. When they "had planted near the running waters and brought forth fruit in due season," the divine Nicholas, the mother ceased to bear; sterile from that day producing no more children, as if Nature, having lavished such bounty, could give no more. When the mother brought him into the light as at once the purest and the last noble offspring, a fruit of true spiritual union, the parents endowed the world with the acme of the virtues, that truly beautiful and bounteous issue—Nicholas [I

repeat], the admirable!

Although their son typified with his conception that of the Baptist, whose mother, though sterile, brought him forth, yet John, when he was brought into the world, unlocked his mother's womb, but Nicholas conversely closed his.

When it came time to nurse the infant and he was placed at the maternal breast, God signified to all what kind of man Nicholas was to be when he should come to the age of discretion. For it is a fact that though throughout the rest of the week he would nurse at the breast like any infant when Wednesday and Friday came he would take milk but once on each of them. Thus from the earliest moment, self-disciplined by rigid rule even before boyhood and from the very beginning, Nicholas showed how abstinence was a familiar token. And so grew, the model of good behavior- in part reflecting the habits of his parents, but also in part developing a goodness from within.

Then, like some good and fertile soil, when he reached the proper age he was sent to the gramaticus for schooling. Under him and from his keen and subtle genius, in a short time Nicholas mastered the many disciplines although all those of political and mercantile nature he rejected. He avoided immoderate companions and consorting and conversing with women. Refusing even so much as to turn his eyes in their direction, he bade them goodbye. Taking leave of worldly ways, he spent all his time in holy churches, according to the saying of the divine David preferring to be abject to them [Ps 83].

After the incumbent bishop of Myra had in a single instant yielded up both his see and his life and had set out on the path to God, a holy desire suffused all the bishops and the most eminent clergy subject to him to discover the one man most worthy to be appointed to that charge. When all of them had assembled in the church, one urged that the matter be entrusted in prayer to the will and wisdom of God. All concurred as warmly as if each had presented the idea himself. Then God, Who fulfills the desire of those fearing Him and hears their prayers, revealed to one of them who would lead the church in the future, for in due course He

appeared to him in a holy vision enjoining him to go stand at the entrance of the temple, there to greet the first man to enter. That man would be the one who was inspired to his action by His own Divine Spirit. Then the clergy should receive him [his name would be Nicholas] and ordain him bishop, as the one predestined for the post. When the holy man had experienced the mysterious vision, he communicated it to the clergy and synod.

While all the rest devoutly prayed, he to whom this great revelation had been vouchsafed went to the stipulated place. At about the hour of Matins our estimable Nicholas, impelled by the Holy Spirit, came to the church. In its vestibule the man deemed worthy of the vision received him. "What do people call you, my son?" he earnestly inquired. "Nicholas the sinner," he simply and unaffectedly answered, "and I am the servant of Your Sanctity."

At these humble and courteous words of our exemplary man, to be sure partly because of the name of Nicholas which had been foretold when it appeared, but partly also because of the extraordinary, unmistakable modesty [for the holy man knew the saying, "Whom does God look to here below, except the meek and the peaceable?"], he knew that this was the man whom God was signifying.

At that, joy suffused him, just as if he had stumbled on some precious treasure. He thought of this disclosure as pure wealth. "Follow me, son," he directed. Taking him by the hand, he led him to the bishops, who recognized at once what had already been foretold to them by their colleague. They, too, filled with holy joy, recognized that the virtue of the man was in accord with the will of God.

Then they immediately conducted the saint to the sanctuary of the temple. When news of this affair had spread about [for it is natural for news to circulate in such important matters and to employ swift wings], uncounted masses poured in the church. In a loud voice the bishops proclaimed: "Accept, our sons, this man as your shepherd, whom the Holy Spirit has anointed for you and to whom he has submitted your souls for guidance and instruction. He has been made our leader not by human but by divine determination. He

whom we have been longing for we have: whom we were seeking for, now we receive. As long as we may truly be shepherded and protected by him, we need not lack hope that in the day of the Coming and the Revelation we may stand firm as a people beloved of God."

To these words the people added their own expression of gratitude, and addressed God those jubilees which cannot be expressed in words. Then the holy synod of bishops together with the clergy, at once invested him with what belonged to the office by law and what by custom. They appointed him Pontiff, though he was slow and hesitant to accept that pontifical honor. Because of a truly praiseworthy sense of constraint, he could hardly ascend the bishop's throne to assume the prefecture and presidency of Myra, the proper dissemination of the Word of Truth and Piety adherence to orthodoxy, and the right teaching of it.

When every land subject to his rule had received Constantine's decrees of toleration, all Christians and confessors returned to their own states. Thus the citizens of Myra received back their pontiff Nicholas, an unbloodied victor though by nature and will a martyr. Strengthened by the gifts which God had granted to him, he cured all the infirm from everywhere.

So famous and renowned did he quickly become not only among the faithful by among many of the infidels as well that in all minds he was admired beyond the power of words.

Now when he discovered that many of the shrines of the idols still existed and that the great broods of demons dwelt therein and were disturbing some of the citizens of Myra, incensed in mind he set out with force and holy zeal to rage through the whole infested region. Wherever he found such a shrine, he tore it down, reducing it to dust. In this way he drove the mass of demons away and brought about tranquillity for the folk to enjoy. Understand, when the saint as adversary of the Evil Spirit thus waged war, it was the inspiration of the Supreme Being and more divine Intelligence that effected these results for him. Eventually he did not even abstain from the temple of Artemis, but attacked it also, doing with it as he

had done with the others.

The temple was outstanding—remarkably beautiful and unsurpassed in magnitude. It had been a most felicitous resort for demons. But when Nicholas launched his attack against the temple, an attack both vigorous and devastating, he not only destroyed everything that towered aloft, and hurled that to earth, but he uprooted the whole from its foundations. Indeed, what was highest, at the very pinnacle of the temple, was embedded in the earth, and what was in the earth was impelled into the air.

The evil demons who had no way of withstanding the attacking saint, fled shrieking aloud. And they protested that they had suffered great agony at his hands and were driven mercilessly from their possessions. Clearly, the saint's force in effecting this campaign, and the attack which he launched against the demons, brought good results.

There was a man, once famous, who had fallen into obscurity and from riches to poverty. He had been reduced to extreme want in all material ways. When the day came that he lacked the very essentials of life (ah, shame! to what extreme does poverty progress!), he determined to sell into prostitution at a price his three beautiful daughters to whoever were willing to buy, with the profit from each to sustain himself and them. It was impossible for him to marry them off; for because of their excessive poverty, all beaux disdained them. Now once having convinced himself, he pondered the disreputable plan, and was already making the first move toward that shameless act. But Thou, Lord, Who art by nature both good and the source of every good, and dost benignly hearken to our needs, didst convey news of this plight to the ears of Nicholas. And Thou didst send him like a good angel and ready helper to that poor man, who had already reached the point of decision, that Nicholas might at one and the same time relieve his poverty and free him from that which was more oppressive than poverty.

<Picture>Let us scrutinize together the compassion mingled with good sense of this saint. For Nicholas could not bear either to approach him to discuss the matter (however briefly), or show him

the hand that should rescue him, as those are wont to do who bare that hand for philanthropy but with a mean and earthbound heart. For he sensed what arrogance it would be to approach one who had fallen from riches and glory into want—how it would cover one with shame and too vividly recall his one-time felicity. Rather, just as Nicholas was striving to live up to the evangelic precept that a good deed must not be identified as the act of a Christian lest the Christian use his beneficence for his own gain, so he should divorce himself from this deed and not seek glory from men. Indeed, whenever he did anything good, he tried harder to hide his actions than do those who do evil. So, after he had bagged a sum of gold, in the dead of night he went to that man's home. The minute he had thrown the bag through the window, he hastily returned to his home, disquieted at the thought of being seen. When the poor man arose later in the morning, he found the gold. Loosing the string with difficulty, he was dumfounded, thinking himself deluded and fearing that what he saw before him was fool's gold. For in such circumstances how could he imagine that a benefactor would be willing for him to benefit without knowing the source of the benefaction? Then assaying the gold with the sensitive tips of his fingers and scrupulously testing it, he concluded that it was in fact gold. He was elated, he marveled, he was transported. In the realization of such joy he shed warm tears. Mentally checking down the roll of all his many acquaintances, he could find none to whom he could ascribe what had been done. He attributed this gift to God, incessantly and tearfully rendering thanks to Him. Then with overflowing heart he strove before all else to erase the mischief of his sin against God. He married off one of his daughters, the eldest of course, providing as dowry for her the mysterious gold which had so abundantly been supplied. Yet at a later time it came to the attention of the remarkable Nicholas and he verified the fact, that the man was preparing to carry through a resolve to sell the second of his daughters, despite his vain hope that through marriage he might avert a second such evil occasion. Thereupon, unperceived by anyone, during the night Nicholas threw an equally valuable bag of gold through the same window. And so again, when the man arose in the morning and found the gold as before he was once more dumbfounded. Prostrate on the ground he wet the earth with his hot tears, saying: "God, Who dost gladden the wretched and are the font of our well-being, Who even once didst become man for

my disobedience, and now hast freed me and my daughters from the snare of, the Enemy, show Thou me the one who obeyest Thy will, who is angel among men and reflector of Thy goodness. Who is this man who has snatched us from the poverty which overwhelms us, and freed us from our loathsome intentions? For lo, out of Thy mercy I now give a daughter to wed, conjoined in lawful matrimony. Till now she has escaped becoming the prey of the Devil and a source of profit for me. What a sorrow, that—more overwhelming than any other catastrophe to me!" He uttered this prayer, and forthwith arranged for the marriage of his second daughter He was now consumed by a firm belief and high hope that the same evil occasion would not arise with respect to the third daughter. Surely a bridegroom could not be lacking! Because of the previous happenings he confidently imagined that in the instance of this daughter he would have her dowry ready at hand. As a peer of her sisters she should receive equal generosity. This time he waited, watchfully, night after night on guard, to anticipate that singular disburser of money when he came again unannounced. If and when he should come again, he would learn from that person who he was and why he was distributing gold in this way. The father watched very carefully, awaiting the unknown's appearance. Then at the third hour in the dead of night, the servant of God Nicholas came to the now customary spot with silent tread, and now again threw a tied bag of gold through the same window, swiftly retreating toward home The girls' father, when he heard the sound of gold as it struck and realized that it was the anticipated gift of wealth, as fast as he could ran after the man. When he caught up with him and recognized who it was (for because of his family's position and celebrity Nicholas could not hide his identity) he dropped to Nicholas's feet, calling him redeemer, reviver, savior of souls who were foundering in dire peril. "For had not," he said, "the good Lord in His compassion awakened thy pity, then long ere this, alas unhappy me!, I would have perished with my three daughters. But now through you God has granted salvation to us and freed us from the mischievous mischance of sin. He has lifted the indigent from the mire and caused the poor to rise from the poverty also.

These words he uttered with tears of joy and in the warm glow of faith. Then Nicholas, as soon as he realized that he had failed to keep his identity hidden from the man, made him arise. He bound

the man by an oath never in the whole course of his life to relate to others what had occurred, or to make known the benevolent act. Now all the actions of the marvelous Nicholas, this one is the most charitable and the best known.

Now after he had long lived in this manner, renowned for his virtuous conduct, he asperged the metropolis of Myra with sweet and lovely unction distilled from the blossoms of divine Grace. When he came to the very advance age, full of days both heavenly and earthly, he need must comply with the common law of nature, as is man's lot. He was ill but a short time. In the grip of that illness, while rendering those lauds and thanksgivings to God which are said in death, he happily yielded up his spirit [for while he desired to remain in the flesh, Nicholas equally desired to be unyoked from it]. He left this brief and transitory life to cross over to that blessed everlasting life where he rejoices with the angels while more clearly and openly contemplating the light of Truth. But his previous body, borne by the holy hands of bishops and all the clergy with torches and with lights, was rested in the crypt which is at Myra.

Pilgrims flocked to Myra from all parts of the earth as numerous partakers of his grace. It happened that some lived in the remote regions of Lycia and therefore had to travel for many days; nonetheless undeterred, they resolved to visit the tomb of the saint and partake of sanctification. So they raised their sails and set out on the sea for the metropolis. A malignant demon that once dwelt in the temple of Artemis but had been expelled with many another when glorious Nicholas had toppled the shrine to earth became aware of their sea journey. Partly in hatred for the saint, because Nicholas had destroyed his temple and thereby made him homeless, by his powers trying to exterminate him, but partly also in wanting to keep the pilgrims from the exercise of sanctification, with a wish to undo their plans he disguised himself as a woman, carrying a jar apparently full of oil. The "woman" said to the pilgrims that she would very much like to carry the jar to the saint's tomb, but that she feared the thought of making so long a voyage. For, she said, it is not possible that any woman alive would be so brave as to undertake the difficult sea voyage. "Therefore I ask you to take this jar and present it at the tomb of the saint. There you can fill his lamps with the oil." The horrible demon made this

request in words, handing over the jar to the pilgrims. However, as I shall shortly relate, this was the first step in an evil action and one truly worthy of the demon who made it. Then they received it, and the first day of their voyage passed. O faithful servant of God and egregious defender of those in jeopardy, Nicholas! This too was thy task, which was performed miraculously and beyond the power of imagination! For in the night Nicholas appeared to one of them and ordered the jar to be thrown into the deep.

When they arose at first light, they did as he said and cast it into the sea. At once the sky lit up in flame, and the most terrific stench followed. Then the waters began to split apart, booming like hell broken loose, with a tremor like an earthquake, emitting a rumbling; and drops of water glistened in the morning light. Then the ship, buffeted by the huge waves, began to sink. The men, stunned by such an unbelievable prodigy, lamenting as one, and clearly hopeless, looked at each other but found no way out of their plight. Yet he who from afar had taken account of their safety and had ordered that the jar be cast into the sea now appeared before them. He freed them from that evil instance and from the peril at sea; for at once the ship, without further interruption, moved from that spot, and the men had their fears assuaged. A gentle and fragrant breeze wafted them, and they delighted in the balm. Their hearts were filled with the greatest joy!

A Traditional St. Nicholas Prayer

"God, Who didst grace the Blessed Nicholas as protector of imperiled innocence whilst he lived, and after his death by countless miracles, grant that by his merits we may be freed from perversion of justice while alive and from the fires of Gehenna after death."

St. Columba Press the Life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

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